

THE *Final Straw*

A WEEKLY ANARCHIST SHOW



The Final Straw is a weekly anarchist and anti-authoritarian radio show bringing you voices and ideas from struggle around the world. Since 2010, we've been broadcasting from occupied Tsalagi land in Southern Appalachia (Asheville, NC).

We also frequently feature commentary (serious and humorous) by anarchist prisoner, Sean Swain.

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cory doctorow on *Walkaway*



The Final Straw Radio

Feb 2, 2022

This week, we are re-broadcasting an interview with the sci-fi and picture book author, technologist and social critic Cory Doctorow. Cory is an editor of the blog BoingBoing, a fellow at the Electronic Frontier Foundation and the book we spoke of on this episode was *Walkaway*, out from Head of Zeus and TOR books. The novel plays with themes of open source technologies, class society, post-scarcity economics, ecological remediation, drop-out culture and liberatory social models. It was released a few days ago in paperback, along with matching re-issues of his other adult sci-fi novels.

For the hour, we spoke about themes from the book, sharing, trans-humanism, imagination and monsters. To find more work by Cory, check out his blog **craphound.com**. You can also find him on twitter, free writings on Project Gutenberg, his content on **archive.org**, or his podcast. In 2019 he released *Radicalized*, a collection of four novellas, and in 2020 he released *Attack Surface*, a novel in the universe of his prior works, *Little Brother* and its sequel, *Homeland*.

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deprived is, again, not a difficult thing to understand. It doesn't require that we be literally headed into transhumanism for it to be relevant. I think that's good because transhumanism is a great science fiction MacGuffin, it has very little connection with technological reality in the biotech realm.

TFSR: Okay. Cory, thank you so much for having this chat. I've really enjoyed it. And I think listeners are going to get a real kick out of it. You said some really awesome things.

Cory: Oh, well, thank you.

TFSR: Where can people in the audience find your writing and keep up on the books that you're publishing?

Cory: I'm pretty easy to find. Let me check if I am still the top query in Google today. I usually am. I'm the sixth Cory on Google this morning. So I'm pretty easy to find, Cory Doctorow. I am one of the editors of a website called BoingBoing at **boingboing.net**. **Craphound.com** — it's my personal site. You can get on my mailing list and get on my podcast, I podcast short stories and articles there. And I have a Twitter feed **@Doctorow**. My books are available wherever fine books are sold. I should mention that if you want a Fairtrade ebook or audiobook, I actually retail my ebooks and audiobooks, even though they're published by traditional publishers, I've convinced them to let me set up a store. So I sell them at the same price as Amazon, but I get the cut that Amazon would normally take and then I send the rest back to my publisher, and then they give me my royalties. So it's a way of effectively doubling my royalties. So if you want to indulge in some electronic media purchasing, that's a way to do it. One of the things that are out there right now is the audiobook of *Walkaway*, which I self-produced, and which has some really astoundingly good readers. Amber Benson from *Buffy* and Wil Wheaton from *Star Trek* and Amanda Palmer, who was in the *Dresden Dolls*, all read on it, along with several other very talented ebook readers. So I'm extremely happy with how that worked out. I should mention it's all DRM-free, and there's no license agreement. You don't need to give up any rights to buy those books.

TFSR: So thanks for sharing, Cory.

Cory: Well, thank you. Thanks for your interest.

an idea because I fear that— because the people who tend to wield technology, tend to be the powerful people and that sort of scenario that you were breaking down and *Walkaway* around the elite class becoming gods and then denying everyone else the ability to reach that point seemed like what my cynical mind would actually see happening in the world. But can you talk a little bit about immortality, about technology as a means of escaping the mortal coil, and maybe what values you see in the mortal coil that got troubled by some of the different characters like Tam, for instance?

Cory: There's a really good book about this, and I nod to it in the book [*Walkaway*] called *Citizen Cyborg* by James Hughes, who's a humanist transhumanist. He has a humanist transhuman program. And he argues that the problem with this kind of transhumanism is fairly-distributed access to the technologies, not the technologies themselves. So I'm of the view that science-fiction rarely predicts specific technological innovation well, but what it does predict with incredible accuracy is our widespread social fears and aspirations for technology. I think the science fiction stories that we tell that are very current, that are very resonant are a diagnostic tool for what it is we worry about and what it is we hope for, not for what's actually going to happen, except to the extent that, of course, the things that you hope for may happen because you might work towards them. But it's not like it's got a predictive value. We're not fortune-tellers.

I think that the idea that technology will change what it means to be human has a pretty obvious corollary in what's going on in our world. A lot of the institutions that we define our humanity by, be it family, names, nationality, or what have you, are challenged by network communications. I think the fear of a transhuman rift between the wealthy and the rest of us feels like there might be a rift between the life circumstances of the wealthy and the rest of us that would make it impossible for them to understand or empathize or even really be said properly to be in the same species or circumstances the rest of us. If the rich never see the poor, if mating means that the rich never marry the poor, if the rich live a life circumstance that is completely different from the poor, then they are in some way speciating, even if it's not biological, even if transhumanism isn't doing it for them. Moreover, if we live in a world in which market logic dictates healthcare, and so poor people die of preventable diseases and rich people get to live very long lives, then that transhumanist idea of some of us being medically privileged and the rest of us being medically

TFSR: This week we're presenting an interview that I conducted with sci-fi and picture book author, technologist, and social critic Cory Doctorow. Cory is an editor of the blog BoingBoing.net, a fellow at the Electronic Frontier Foundation, and his most recent book is entitled *Walkaway*, and it's out from Head of Zeus and Tor Books. The novel plays with themes of open-source technologies, class society, post-scarcity economics, ecological remediation, dropout culture, and liberatory social models. It was released a few days ago also in paperback, along with matching reissues of his other adult sci-fi novels.

For the hour, we chat about themes from the book, about sharing, imagination, privilege, and monsters. To find more work by Cory, check out his blog craphound.com. You can also find him on Twitter. You can find free versions of his writing at Project Gutenberg, as well as interviews and recordings that he's done at archive.org or his podcast. Links will be found in the show notes for this episode. Cory, thank you very much for taking the time to chat.

Cory Doctorow: Oh, it's my pleasure. Thanks for your interest in the book.

TFSR: It was a really pleasurable read. One thing I love about speculative fiction is finding the roots in the current world looking at the divergences between the story and the IRL and playing with those imaginary threads, tying them together. *Walkaway* mentions Idle No More, the Arab Spring, it alludes to Occupy and even old back-to-the-landers in Vermont. From this history-of-the-future view, what agency is given to resistance movements of today or just yesterday?

Cory: That's a really good question. My theory of change is that we get to a better place not by laying out a plan that takes us from A to Z, but by taking immediate steps that in some way materially improve the circumstances for resistance or change, that then creates a more favorable landscape from which the next volley can be launched. So it's a lot more like a software hill-climbing algorithm, where you don't know the terrain and but all you do is you always try to move up to more favorable terrain, rather than this idea of a knowable world. Maybe this is where I break with Marxism and its so-called scientific theory of history that has this deceptive and seductive inevitability about how we can chart a course. And instead of charting a course, I advocate for a unified heuristic. We all use

the same rule of thumb to try to make things better. And the material improvements that we make just in some way benefit the people that come in the future, in some unknowable and unguessable situation. So rather than try to lay in the material needed for a battle whose contours we can't predict, we just try to make things as versatile and usable as possible for whoever comes next. And so in this future, I think the people who are on the vanguard, are people who are picking up the stuff that we left lying around, without knowing exactly how it would be used. And some of it turns out to be useful in unexpected ways. And some of the stuff that maybe we predicted would be most useful turns out to have no earthly use.

TFSR: That's really well-said. Actually, that reminds me— I had mentioned in one of the emails that I was interested in and had been looking into Cooperation Jackson recently as a project happening in the deep south of the US. It's an initiative to grow a tech industry and manufacturing and fabricating belt, employing the mostly black and working-class populations in a democratic, almost permacultural approach. It doesn't seem perfect, obviously. But they've really laid out their plan, really open-source style in this book called Jackson Rising. They're influenced by Rojava, by the Mondragon cooperative, by Black Liberation struggles, by the Zapatistas, and many other diverse movements. Are there any current anti-capitalist projects or movements around the world that are hacking and making that inspire you or that you're keeping close tabs on?

Cory: It's a really good question. Again, I know I keep saying that, but these are good thought-provoking meaty questions.

I'm sure that there are explicitly anti-capitalist projects. I mean, Dmitry Kleiner and the Telekommunisten in Berlin sprang to mind. But I'm interested in the way that projects that don't have an explicitly anti-capitalist agenda, nevertheless can serve the cause of a post-capitalist or even a mixed-market technological future. So things free and open-source software, the movement for net neutrality, cognitive radio technologies, things like end-to-end encrypted messenger clients. And also, not incidentally, that the tools for evaluating all of these that— We're getting into better trainer training tools and better critical frameworks for understanding them. So EFF, with whom I work, sometimes the Electronic Frontier Foundation, has historically published scorecards of different kinds of security tools. And they've stopped doing it for end-to-end en-

Timmy Drop Tables, that is whose name is a MySQL code injection attack, that if you try to enter the kid into the school rolls, the school rolls fall apart. That database-breaking function of names is a really interesting thing. Names have this resonance in storytelling, where if you know Rumpelstiltskin's name, you can make him do your bidding. If you know the Demon's name, you can conjure him or banish him, and so on. So the true names of things have always held power. One of the things that the internet has been really good for, and that has made the name wars so important, is that the internet has always been a place where people could have a new name. And it's enabled people, because of those new names, to experiment with new identities. And those new identities are part of why we have things like gender fluidity, as a thing that has always existed but has come into prominence, because it gives people a space in which they can be fluid in their identity, without exposing themselves to risk, by budding off a new identity to play with. When they feel comfortable about reintegrating it into the main branch of their identity if they ever do. That has created a real social revolution that's playing out all over the world.

It's also a force for evil, the Twitter is full of Nazis who don't use their real names to avoid reprisals. We now live in an age in which one of the great sins that you can commit that violates the terms of service of almost everything is disclosing the real name of someone, we call it doxxing. Disclosure of someone's real name, when they operate under a pseudonym has become grounds for online execution, which I'm not saying that's wrong and I'm not saying it's right either. I'm saying that it just tells a lot about the right to the name. Giving a character a lot of names, I thought had a currency to it, a Zeitgeist-iness.

TFSR: You could almost write a whole novel, just probably telling the stories behind each of those names.

Cory: Sure. Well, in his case, they're the 20 most popular names from the 1890 census in order. One of my writing techniques is that when I want to name a character I use, at least as a placeholder, I often use the census. I go like "I want a name that's really common." Because the census produces popularity-ranked names. So I pick a first name and a surname from the top of the census, or I want a very uncommon name, so I pick it from the bottom. It's a cheap and easy way to do it.

TFSR: I'm personally a little uncomfortable with transhumanism as

torow. That's the name of this character. And every time the parents come in, they call her by more of her name. So like, "Poesy has to go back to bed. Poesy Taylor Doctorow, go back to bed. Poesy Emmeline Taylor Doctorow, go back to bed." And eventually, it turns into the whole name. It's fun in a kid's book where there's a cumulative call and response.

TFSR: That's funny, too, that reminds me of Etc from *Walkaway*. What inspired that? Your daughter?

Cory: One of the things about the immigrant experience I come from — it's different for different people — is that we have a lot of names. My grandfathers had their birth names, which were usually Russian or Eastern European names. And then they had a Hebrew name. And then they had a Yiddish nickname. And then they had an anglicized name, and sometimes more than one anglicized name. And they used different names depending on who they talked to. And I played with this before. I wrote a novel called *Someone Comes to Town, Someone Leaves Town* where the characters have a different name every time they are referred to. It has a specific salience in this technological moment, because of the name wars, where Google Plus and Facebook had this insistence on everyone having one canonical name that they use to face the world, which produced all kinds of shitty problems. But it also sparked a bunch of really good arguments about names. And there's a beautiful essay called "False things programmers believe about names." It includes things like everyone has a name, everyone has one name, everyone has a name that can be written down. Everyone has a unique name. Everyone has a name that's unique when you factor in their date of birth, and so on and so on. This is actually also become the subject of a Supreme Court case over voter suppression because one of the heuristics that the voter-roll-purging software used was that it assumed that it was very unlikely that two people would share the same name and the same birthday. And it turns out that for a lot of reasons, that's not true. Among them is the fact that a lot of databases, when they don't have a birthday, default to January 1. There are tons of people who share that birthday. But also guess what month people named June tend to be born in *laughs*. Or people named Carol, guess what day of the year they tend to be born — December 25. There are a lot more collisions than you'd expect. I wanted to play with this idea that you could have a character that had lots and lots of names that would break a database.

There's a joke that got picked up in XKCD about a kid named

encrypted messengers because they realize that there isn't a dimension on which an encrypted messaging tool is best. Instead, there are different kinds of threat models for different kinds of users. Now they're publishing plain-language, easy-to-understand models, or frameworks for evaluating what encrypted messenger you should use and understanding whether any given encrypted messenger is one that you should trust and that you would find useful.

And to me, in terms of aiding insurgency, which I guess is what all these things have in common, they don't have an explicit political valence, but they have an anti-authoritarian valence, that these tools are really useful. And I think that the place where, again, if I break with the Marxist left on the inevitability of history, maybe the place where I break with the intersectional left, is on whether a tool can be made to benefit insurgents that doesn't benefit insurgents, we don't like. The alt-right is an insurgent movement as well. And when I look at movements to throttle the alt-right, I always concern myself with the extent to which that will also throttle anti-authoritarian left-wing movements. For example, any framework in which it becomes easier to remove content from the web-based on the politics of its speech, I think, has to be viewed with extreme caution, not because there isn't a speech that is bad speech, or that the world would be better without, but because the ease with which speech can be removed based on its content is a threat to anyone who wants to say anything unpopular.

TFSR: Yeah, it's funny, now becoming personally old enough, I'm almost 40 to have seen this trajectory a couple of times. For instance, I'm in the US, seeing Democrats be in office and then seeing Democrats allowed to push certain boundaries or increase incarceration rates, or deport more people, or do drone strikes without any sort of repercussions to the executive branch. And then a Republican administration follows directly after, it's terrible when it's happening when the Democrats are doing it, but there seems to be a lack of understanding to some people that the tool is going to be wielded by someone and you don't get to choose necessarily who wields that tool. Whether or not it's positive or "positive" for your goal.

Cory: Yeah, I think that's right. American liberals were pretty sanguine about the extension of really extreme executive power to Obama when he was using it to fight the hardline GOP Republican Congress. And now

they're about to have their past sins visited upon them, not least because there's now the power of the president to create secret assassination lists that a certain liberal defended in the last administration. But also, as you say, mass incarceration, the failure to close Gitmo, and so on. A lot of that triangulation Clintonian political stuff is how they went from convenient instrumental doctrines into pluripotent immortal weapons that now get to be wielded by whoever sits in the President's chair. And we have a maniac with a lot less discretion sitting in the President's chair. I'm not going to stick up for Obama, but I do think that if nothing else, he was circumspect and premeditated in a way that Trump isn't capable of, which at least allowed us to have a threat model. I always like to distinguish, when I think about threat models, between the cat burglar who plans a robbery of your house because they know what jewels you have hidden in your wall safe. And that time I parked my car in Gastown in Vancouver, which is the principal part of heroin ingress into the Americas. I left a quarter sitting on the dashboard and someone broke into the rental car to steal a quarter. It's possible to think about that jewel thief in a way that rationally defends against it. Like if the jewel thief's expected return on selling your jewels is less than the cost of breaking into your house, you can secure your house from the jewel thief because they don't want to waste money. Whereas the junkie is acting without any premeditation, and it's very hard to defend against. And when we think about political threat models, Obama at least was predictable. We knew where he would squander capital and where he wouldn't in the political sense. Whereas Trump picks dumb fights. And a loose cannon on deck is much scarier when it's a really big scary cannon than when it's a small constrained cannon. And Obama made the president into a much bigger cannon.

TFSR: Yeah. With the aid of the American people.

You mentioned that you're a fellow at the Electronic Frontier Foundation, and a lot of your writing focuses on tech tools, for more secure organizing and knowledge sharing, and resisting tyranny. For instance, *Little Brother*, as a novel focused largely on ubiquitous surveillance and the socialization of resistance via, for instance, parties where people shared encryption face-to-face. The book was both the commentary as well as a spur to get folks thinking about resistance with actual models of going about it. Can you talk about your views of the cultural and activist interventions that you engage with? How do they overlap?

because the copyright enforcement has basically made it very expensive top-rate alternatives to the traditional music industry. And so now we're down to four giant record labels that all have the same shitty contracts. And they all have the same abusive terms for any musician who signs with them. Even though Spotify is throwing billions of dollars at the labels, the labels contractually have to give only infinitesimal fractions of a penny to musicians out of those billions. You've just ended up with a system where it's hard for them to harness real growth, the anemic growth that there is, they get the windfall from, and musicians are trapped in a sharecropping model.

TFSR: You mentioned that you had a children's book coming out soon.

Cory: Yeah, I have a picture book. It's called *Poesy the Monster Slayer*. And it's about a little girl who's obsessed with monsters. And one night when the monsters break into her bedroom, she tears apart all the girly toys in her bedroom and repurposed them as field-expedient monster-killing weapons. When the beholder leaps off of her bookcase and hovers in front of her with its millions of riding eyes, she takes her Barbie bubble-gum-scented perfume and mace it. After each monster battle, her parents come in and put her back to bed and say "I'm going to be a zombie tomorrow morning if you don't let me get a good night's sleep and stop horsing around in your room." And then the punchline is that they turn into zombies that she can't defeat, but the zombie that they can't defeat just tucks her into bed. Its attack mode is that tucks her into bed and doesn't let her get out again. And the penultimate monster that she fights is Frankenstein's monster. And she topples it over and then uses her sewing kit seam ripper to take its head off. And they tuck its head into bed with her and the two of them share a wry glance, the Frankenstein's head, and the little girl as her parents tuck them in and turn the lights out. That's the cute little story. Yeah, spoiler. It's only about 100 words long, so it wouldn't take you long to get to that spoiler. Just don't tell your little children before you read it to them and you'll be fine.

TFSR: That sounds like a story that only a parent could write.

Cory: Yeah, certainly. And the part of the running joke is the name of the kid is very long, and it's my daughter's name. So my daughter has a crazy long name. She's Poesy Emmeline Fibonacci Nautilus Taylor Doc-

We lost a lot of the social elements. It's much harder to have a community where you post links to music that you might like, that is infringing. You can still point to YouTube, but increasingly, there are risks of communities facing legal sanctions, being shut down because of the preponderance of links to stuff. And so what that means is that the recommendation and the concentration of people who might be interested in your music as a product in one easy-to-advertise-to place, that has been very eroded through these anti-infringement anti-piracy programs, but the infringement hasn't been eroded. The people who will tell you that there's more infringement than ever are the people who claimed that this would be what they needed to stop infringement. The record industry, their own stats show that their efforts were worse than useless, that they ended up with more infringement, not less. But of course, their argument is, "well, it would be even more if we hadn't done all of this." We swallow the spider to catch the fly, now give us some birds to catch the spider. Once we accepted that any cost is bearable in the service of defending music from copyright infringement, then the sky's the limit. It turns out that shutting down services didn't do it, disconnecting people from the Internet didn't do it, all these other things didn't do it. So just give us more extreme measures, just keep ramping up our power to be judge, jury, and executioner of people on the internet and the things that they say, and eventually, we'll be able to get rid of copyright infringement.

The other thing that forcing this decentralization did was it made it harder to charge rent. Napster had a business model that was "we will go to the record labels, we'll get a license from them, and we'll charge five bucks a month to be a Napster customer. And then we'll measure what people are downloading and we will pay out the money in that, according to who downloaded what, whose stuff got downloaded." It was literally a model where the more people pirated, the more money you got paid. And now what we have is this fragmented underground system that, because of court decisions like Grokster, that said that companies have liability if they know and can measure what's going on, the systems are deliberately designed so that no one can audit them and figure out which musicians to pay. So they just really shot themselves in the head. They still make tons of money from things like streaming services, the legit streaming services like Spotify. Musicians don't make any money from them, but the labels make gobs of money from them. And that's because they have these super abusive contracts. And those contracts have become more common, not less, because there are fewer alternative places to bandy your music about

Cory: Culturally, there is an anti-authoritarian streak that is built into the internet. It's not determinative, it's not like using the internet makes you anti-authoritarian. But if you have anti-authoritarian tendencies, there's a lot that the internet has to offer you. And much of what gave us the internet, as we understand it today, was anti-authoritarian. It may have had its roots and things BBN and the RAND Corporation, building command and control networks for the US military. But its early users and the people who sketched out its contours and built a lot of its infrastructure and a lot of its norms and embedded technological assumptions did so out of a posture of anti-authoritarianism. And so culturally, anti-authoritarianism is not an end in itself. Because anti-authoritarianism can lead to like, "What do you mean, I'm not allowed to say racist things and rape people. You're not the boss of me!" But anti-authoritarianism is an axis on which to plot other politics, I think good politics are better when they're anti-authoritarian. That the people who are suspicious of their ability to tell other people what to do, and the likelihood that they'll get it right produce better outcomes than people who are convinced of their infallibility and the right to dictate to other people.

One of the places where the politics and the culture of the internet overlap, is in that anti-authoritarianism. Going back to Marxism, Marx had this idea that being alienated from your labor made you susceptible to being talked to about the problems of labor alienation. And I think making your friends and enjoying the world through systems that are intrinsically anti-authoritarian, or that have anti-authoritarian roots, makes you a good candidate to talk to about anti-authoritarianism.

You know "there are no atheists in a foxhole"?, it's harder to be an authoritarian on the internet. It's not impossible, clearly, but as compared to other systems, the internet, because there's the coercion on the internet is hard. And not only that, but people who have benefited from the inability of others to coerce them, have then gone on to build other systems on the internet that make coercion hard. Again, it's not impossible, I'm not pretending that shitty Twitter mobs aren't coercive. I'm just saying that the shitty Twitter mobs are an aberration, as compared to many other systems that exist to evade coercion. One of the things that I concern myself with a lot is what I think of it as historic revisionism in which we say that early internet optimists were naive about the power of the Internet to be a force for bad, and I happened to know those people really personally and I'm extremely I'm aware of what they had in mind. I was there when they were doing that, I was talking to them about what are we trying to

do here, I was working for them and drawing a paycheck from them. And their view was not “the internet is automatically going to be great”. It’s raining soup, let’s fill up our boots. Their view was that the internet could be unbelievably terrible. let’s make sure that that doesn’t happen. And so, when John Gilmore said the internet interprets censorship and rights around it, he specifically meant that people who operate the most anti-authoritarian parts of the internet, which at the time were old Usenet feeds, whenever someone tries to censor Usenet, do these specific things with the protocols that underpin it, and with their own human effort to make it harder to censor, and those tools might have been developed to ride around damage, to ride around drop nodes and an unreliable network. But they work extremely well to fight censorship. And the people who develop them are ready and willing to do so because they view censorship as illegitimate.

That’s a powerful force. And it’s one that the story of the internet’s early proponents being naive fools. One of the things we have on our side, as we work to make the internet safe for human habitation, a force for good and human thriving is the ethos that the internet should be that, and when you turn your firing squad in a circle and say that the people who fought all along for a free, fair and open Internet just didn’t understand how the internet would go wrong and shouldn’t be listened to, then you make it harder to achieve the free, fair and open Internet that we want. And you do so out of petty personal satisfaction that you get from telling other people that they’re idiots.

TFSR: This reminds me of a part of the book that I keep thinking about, and that keeps resonating with me as a very interesting way of engaging with some of these ideas. So just to bring up a couple of characters. There was Limpopo and Jimmy. Limpopo had put in a hell of a lot of work, designing and building and doing upkeep on a way station and home for people who had started walking away for what was called Default or mainstream society in this dystopia. And people collaborated there to create a new life with others. Jimmy comes in as an intelligent, brash, proud young man who believes in meritocracy and wants to leverage a position of power at the compound called the B&B for himself by riding the coattails of Limpopo. There are also some gender norm dynamics that one could unpack from the way that it goes down in the story.

Can you talk about what inspired you to write this out? And

broke by refusing to pay for it.” But as this turned into the music question, and as Napster came along and became the fastest adopted technology in the history of the world, and as it took the 80% of commercial music that wasn’t available for sale anywhere, at any price, and put it in the hands of everyone who wanted it at any time, night or day, and also automatically started to create communities of interest around music that were not in the mainstream because you would find someone’s collection that you thought was interesting, and you’d open a chat window to them, and you plunder their collection for things that you’d never heard of, but based on them having things that you liked that few other people you could assume that that the rest of it would be interesting to listen to. This thing that was so clearly just good was turned into a vise and became further the rubric for mass internet surveillance and takedown regime where material could remove from the internet without any checks or balances. It became really clear to me that the people who viewed scarcity as a virtue were an existential threat to a free, fair, and open Internet. For whatever reason that that scarcity had become a virtue to them. And so post-scarcity and thinking about it and singing its praises and describing ways in which it could be great, became a cultural project in the service of economic and political projects.

TFSR: I was wondering about this actually because you bring up Napster. And that’s about the time when I was graduating from high school and started paying attention to— I’d been playing on computers for a few years at that point. The things that Gnutella and Napster were providing, the connectivity, the ways of exploring other people’s knowledge and art were just fascinating. And those seem to go away in the early 2000s, because of all this pressure from industries and the FCC, and what have you. Soulseek is still around, but I don’t think people really use it, I mess with it from time to time, and it’s got the same abilities. Do you think it’s just not used as much or talked about because it’s a snake eating its tail, people don’t talk about it, so it doesn’t get used as much. And because people aren’t using it, people don’t talk about it, or just because technologies have maybe the social acceptability of sharing music or sharing art in that way, has now just developed onto a different platform?

Cory: It’s definitely on different platforms. It’s streaming now. Ironically, we lost a bunch of things that would have been very helpful to the industry.

swallow a bird to catch the spider.

So once we accepted that that would be this market in the future, and that the way that we would have these passive incomes in a post-manufacturing society where the WTO allowed all the manufacturing jobs to be offshore to China, and the West would remain wealthy through exporting the intellectual property to China that would then be turned into physical objects and then brought back into the West, and that it would be rent-seeking on the people making the things by owning the rights to the plans to make the things, or the images that are embodied by the things or whatever that the West would remain economically dominant, it became politically impossible to say, “We don’t know how to make a technology that stops you from reading books, unless it’s Wednesday, and you’re standing on one leg.” And so instead, we started trying to approximate it. And the way that we ended up approximating it is with technology that just spies on you all the time. Computers that are designed to not take orders from their owners, but instead to take orders from third parties without even informing the owner what the order is, or allowing them to rescind it or terminate it.

This has wider implications for information security, which is, in some ways, the single most important technological question we have to answer: how do we make computers more secure, as we start putting our bodies inside of them and start putting them inside of our bodies? There’s arguably nothing more important for us to answer authoritatively than that question. But the elevation to virtue of it being hard to make as many copies as you want of something is the outcome of this policy, consensus that emerged that we would just someday have this rentier economy. In that rentier economy, the fact that you can take something valuable and make as many copies as you need, without any incremental cost becomes a problem. Historically, that would have been a utopian scenario.

There’s a thing that everyone needs, and we can make as much of it as anyone needs for free? That’s not a problem historically. But we elevated scarcity to a virtue. And so thinking about post-scarcity is in that regard, a subversive act, because it challenges the whole consensus about what a neoliberal future looks like, a rentier future looks like. The first time I really encountered post-scarcity, I’d encountered it in dribs and drabs in the fights about software piracy in the 80s. There was some ambiguity there and there were still a lot of small independent software companies that made this reasonably convincing case that like, “I’m just some dude who made some accounting software, please don’t make me go

what do you hope readers will get from the debates and battles like these that happen in *Walkaway*?

Cory: In some respects, that is me correcting a sin of my own, which was that I wrote this novel *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* about the ambiguous utopia of meritocracy that like reputation economies, where I posed reputation economies as a not unalloyed good, but as something that can be actually pretty terrible. And people took it as a manual for how to build the future, not as a cautionary tale about how things could go wrong if you use that as your starting point. I wanted to make it less ambiguous, the ambiguous utopia of a reputation economy, I wanted to make it more explicitly dystopic to heighten that, make it visible, make it harder to miss. I think I did that. I hope I did. And I also want people to think a little bit about this starting-life-on-third-base business that when you say someone has done very well objectively, and that something that you’ve measured is bigger for one person than it is for another, that there’s a false quantitateness that misses out on some qualitative elements, which are all the social stuff that goes into that person’s life, all the reasons that they’re over-performing relative to their peers.

TFSR: Can you break that down a little bit? I saw you had responded to a Q&A from a big bookstore in Portland naming your memoirs, something about like, “I’m a privileged white dude, who’s-” I’m misstating that... Can you unpack that a little bit more about where people start from? Why do they perform in certain ways and the invisibility of privilege?

Cory: Yeah, I mean, I expected anyone listening to this to be familiar with the story, but I’ll tell you, from my perspective.

My grandparents did not come from a place where they had a lot of privilege or power. My grandfather was raised on a farm in a part of Belarus that later became Poland. My grandmother was raised in Leningrad, and my grandmother was a child soldier who was inducted into the Civil Defense Corps during the siege of Leningrad at the age of 12. And she served for nearly three years, and then they evacuated the women and children over the winter ice. And she met my grandfather in Siberia when she was inducted into the Red Army. And then the two of them deserted and went to a displaced persons’ camp in Azerbaijan. And that’s where my dad was born. And they came to Canada as displaced people. But Canada

had, at the time, a pretty well-developed social welfare network. And it made sure that my dad got a first-class education. There were also relatively few large businesses that dominated the sectors that they operated in. And so my grandmother's second husband was able to start and operate a successful scrapyard, that gave him the power to go to university, which was also publicly underwritten. And as a result, even though both of my dad's parents were functionally illiterate, he has a Ph.D. in Education. And that's why I grew up in a household where in 1979, we got an Apple 2+, because, by that point, he was head of computer science for a large high school. And Apple came along and gave all those heads of computer sciences Apple computers to take home for the summer, to convince them to not have mainframes, to not do time-sharing on mainframes and their computer science courses. My dad had been teaching with PDPs that they time-shared on and punch cards. And as a result, I had a modem in 1980, I was active on bulletin board systems, I was on the ground floor when the internet came along, I was able to drop out of university and walk straight into a job in a new tech sector, I did very well by it. By the time I was in my mid-20s, I was earning as much as my unionized parents were, without a university degree. All of that arises out of privilege.

I got incredibly lucky by being born when I was born, I got incredibly lucky by being born to who I was born. And some of that luck was not just about the great forces of society, but about explicit redistributive practices that were intended to ensure not just equality of opportunity, but to a certain extent, equality of outcome. That was enormously beneficial to me. And so here, I sit in Southern California, having previously emigrated to the United Kingdom and attained citizenship, and then moving to the US and getting a Green Card through a relatively simple process, because I qualified for an alien of extraordinary ability visa that transitions very easily to a Green Card, and we've just bought a house and we can afford that house. And we've spent a bunch of money on a remodel and all of that. And some of that is because I write good books and work hard. But the reason I got to write good books and work hard and earn enough money to do all those things is that a bunch of forces that are way beyond my control, and that are not well-distributed bored down on my progenitors.

And this is how we went from my grandfather whose mother was kicked to death by a cow on a dirt farm, to me living in a renovated mid-century modern bungalow in Burbank, California in two generations. It wasn't by pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. It was because I

TFSR: That's a thing in the book that I found really interesting, too, is that I don't hear many people talk about post-scarcity economics. And I'd to talk about the technologies of immortality that are talked about in the book. Hierarchies are based on the withholding of something from people. People build hierarchies, but social hierarchies that exist in society, whether it be the class-based ones, or the way that gender power is appropriated throughout society, or racial castes, or whatever, is about privileges being withheld from other people, people being disprivileged. And one of the very basic and from time immemorial ways that happens is the withholding of the means towards one's own ability to have shelter, ability to have food, ability to take care of one's loved ones. Can you talk about what made you start thinking about post-scarcity economics and maybe some influences on your thinking around it?

Cory: Well, going back to this idea about the cultural and political nexus on the internet, one of the things that the internet does is challenge — at the same time it supercharges it — it challenges rentierism, because the ultimate in rentierism is the idea of so-called intellectual property, which is the idea that you have a thing that has no tangible existence, and that, through its creation, generates passive income. And all you have to do is just sit there and wait for it to roll in. This is one of the ways that this fight that I'm engaged in on the policy side about DRM, I think has this wider significance. When you go back to the early literature of intellectual property in the Chicago school, you find this metastatic choice theory where this idea that someone who owns a piece of intellectual property could use some magic technology dust to infinitely divide that intellectual property into a series of products that are ever more tailored to different audiences.

So like, maybe you don't want to spend the full freight to read a book anytime you want. Maybe you just want the right to read the book on Wednesdays while standing on one leg, and the market can produce this standing on one leg Wednesday price through some price discovery mechanism. And then the technology somehow sees to it, that having acquired the book you can only read it on Wednesdays while you're standing on one leg. And it's one of those things where, in a lot of technology policy fights, the answer is in part wanting it badly is not enough. So we don't know how to make the technology that only lets you read a book on Wednesdays while standing on one leg, even if we stipulate that that's a good idea. But once you swallow a spider to catch the fly, you have to

TFSR: It's a pretty awesome set up in the novel, and it's really inspirational, the scope of the book and all the different social conundrums that you're trying to at least touch on and play with how different elements of, for instance, the Free University that's developed, that is escalating people's knowledge and technologies and trying to improve on things all the time. Because you've got people that are disenfranchised from mainstream society, and they choose to leave, but they bring this knowledge and this ability with them and put it towards a collective good. There are just so many examples in the novel. I can't I can't stop gushing about it.

Cory: Oh, thank you. Science fiction does have a tradition of stories about someone wielding enormous technological power because of their special knowledge who nevertheless doesn't have political power, and how the people with political power coerce the people with the technical knowledge into working for them. After civilization collapses, how do Master Blaster and Thunderdome get the mining engineers who know how to convert methane to useful sources of power to work for them? How does the technical staff of Immortan Joe get incentivized to work for him instead of just walking over to the next arroyo and living without this tyrant?

Telling it from the perspective of people who did have this rare, not widely distributed, extremely powerful technical knowledge, finding solidarity with the people rather than the oligarchs, and taking that technical knowledge and spreading it around, that's actually a thing that happens. That's the story of CryptoParty and it's the story of lots of people who can just work for big tech companies, and instead, or in addition, devote their lives to social justice causes and to widely distributing their specialized knowledge. In this case, you have this scientist class that reaches a breaking point with their paymasters, where they realize that the practical immortality technology they're developing has the potential to speciate the human race and make their bosses not just powerful, but immortal, and to deprive everyone else of immortality, and that once everyone else is immortal, once everyone else can't be killed, then the ability of the wealthy and powerful 1% to coerce them becomes significantly reduced, because how do you coerce someone who's not afraid to die? As these people start to defect to the side of the 99%, it becomes more and more obvious to the ones who remained, that what they're engaged in is something morally indefensible and that not only is it morally indefensible, it's morally indefensible and there's an alternative.

got to start life on second base. When I look around at other people who are trying to do what I did, who are trying to become successful writers, who want to become activists, who want to get involved in other activities that require a relatively high degree of technical specialized knowledge, as well as the comfort from which to take risks. The reason those people don't have that is not because of an innate failing of theirs. It's because I am a privileged white dude who got incredibly lucky to be born who I was, and they weren't.

TFSR: Do you read a lot of sci-fi yourself?

Cory: I do. Although, I think a lot of people who read a lot for pleasure in their 20s, by the time I got to my 30s and 40s and became a dad and had a career and so on, my reading for pleasure, or even reading for professional purposes, plummeted. I do a lot less reading now than I used to. But I have a chronic back pain problem. And so I swim for an hour every day, and I have an underwater mp3 player. So I listened to about two novels a month through my swimming. And then I probably read two more a month, or two more books a month. Sometimes novels, sometimes not. If they're novels, they're usually science fiction, as well as a few graphic novels. And I get sent a lot because I write young adult novels and also I've got a picture book coming out, I get sent a lot of kids' books for review or quotes. And I have a 10-year-old, so I just throw them in her room. And if she reads them, then I read them and review them. She's my first approximation sorting function. I read reasonably broadly, but when I worked in a science fiction bookstore, I read a lot. And I know exactly how much I'm not reading because I know how much I read back then.

TFSR: Does your daughter ever contribute to the quotes that go on the covers of books?

Cory: Yeah, funnily enough, one time, I got asked to write a quote for the sequel to a book that she liked a lot called *Giants Beware!* The sequel's called *Dragons Beware!* And they sent it to me as a PDF, so we read it together off my screen. And I told her I'm going to make a quote for this. And they're going to put it on the cover of the book. And she said, "I want to send one in too." So just for yucks, I sent it to the editor, and the editor cut my quote in half to make room for hers.

TFSR: It sounds she has a feature in writing or at least reviewing. I really like political sci-fi, I'm a one-trick pony. I just gravitate towards reading about ideas around politics and around social engagement and social organizing. But a novel that I was reminded of at some point with Walkaway was March Pierce's *Woman on the Edge of Time*. Have you read that before?

Cory: Sure.

TFSR: Especially for its [27:28] of a utopia and a dystopia in a struggle with each other, although her vision definitely had tech serving a visibly more ecologically healing role, rather than what I saw in Walkaway as a sort of mitigating during this hardcore struggle between default and walkaway worlds. I saw more people creating livable structures and the tools that they needed for immediate survival, as opposed to in Pierce's book, maybe it would have been a little bit further on where people were trying to heal landscapes, for instance. Also, it contained more non-human animals than I found in *Walkaway*. Maybe I missed it, but was there an ecological bent in *Walkaway*? Or was it more focused on just this is the destruction, this is us needing to survive and create something new?

Cory: If we've been warned about disaster capitalism by the likes of Naomi Klein, *Walkaway* is, in some ways, a pain to the possibilities of disaster communism. One of the things that walkaways are doing is they're using the catastrophic remnants of environmental collapse as the raw material for a better world. One of the great challenges to a transitional program towards a more broadly distributed future is property relations and the difficulties of expropriation.

I was just on a panel in Australia at a literary festival with an African woman, a white African journalist who had risked her life to report on authoritarianism in Zimbabwe and had been exiled. I think she was actually born there. Maybe it was another regional country. I think it was Zimbabwe. And she was talking about the ANC's proposal to expropriate white farmers and redistribute their lands and about how that had been a real disaster in Zimbabwe for lots of reasons, partly because sophisticated agricultural knowledge wasn't widely distributed, and partly because of the lingering resentments and the difficulty for reconciliation and so on.

And so we talked about it, and I said, "Let's talk about some other

decolonization efforts that had land reform in them. You have the Cubans who after the revolution bought land at market rates. And it's not like the exiled elites of Cuba in Miami therefore forgave them and didn't harbor inter-generational grudges against the Cuban Republic for having taken away the family farm. You have American whites in the South who still nurse these horrible grievances about the antebellum period and land changes after that and so on. Or the post-war period and land changes after that. It's very hard to get people to feel okay about these changes in land ownership. Moreover, it's very easy to activate grievances. So even if people seem to have forgotten about them for a generation, they can be re-activated by reactionary political actors who want to use those grievances to raise a political movement to pursue some reactionary program. Think about the Balkans, where by exploiting these old grievances, it was possible to create a civil war that still has a reactionary neofascist, nationalist element, who never fully lost the power that they gained by exploiting those old divisions.

I think that one of the things that the book proposes is that when life gives you SARS, you might try and make Sarsaparilla. The fact that environmental catastrophe has basically rendered a bunch of land to be uninhabitable and undesired by anyone means that walkaways can, with relatively low risk, just show up there and take this blighted no man's land and turn it back into something worthwhile. But of course, the thing that they discover is that as soon as you rehabilitate something that no one wants, all of a sudden they rediscover their property interest in it. But the thing that they exploited in it is that there's so much blighted land, and remediating it is so easy if you don't care about profits, that as soon as they build something viable on some blighted land, and some oligarch comes along and says, "Hey, that's my patch of blighted dirt and I want it back now that you made it attractive again," they just move on to another patch of blighted dirt and do it all over again. And in fact, each one of these is an opportunity to overcome their previous mistakes and do more ambitious things and just refactor things. They're in some way benefiting from not having that status quo bias that normally happens in things like free software projects where no one wants to start over and refactor things from go because it's just so much work. And you've got so much sunk cost in the status quo. But if someone comes along and just wipes out all your source code every six months, provided that you really still need the thing, shelter is not optional. So they have to go build shelter somewhere. And they just make a virtue out of that vice.